

Communication in Evolution: Social and Technological Transformation

An Interview with **Derrick de Kerckhove**
Director, McLuhan Program

conducted by **Álvaro Bermejo**

Álvaro Bermejo: *Your first virtual world was Literature, and then the Sociology of Art. And suddenly we have Derrick De Kerckhove, a visionary of cyberculture and the new technologies. Are you a character from Asimov, from Moebius, or “only” from McLuhan?*

Derrick de Kerckhove: I am a product of my education in India and Pakistan. As a pre-teen who was exposed to the glories and the miseries of the world, to totally different civilizations, with long histories behind them, once in Canada, I developed a healthy sense of doubt about the world relevance and urgency of semiotics and French post-structuralism in the face of globalization and multicultural conditions. So that when I met McLuhan, I was ready for something new. He was the only professor I ever had who talked about the present and not only the past. He taught me to live and think in real time.

AB: *Any new philosophy contains a new visual conception of the universe, of space and of time. Medieval monks represented theirs in the Book of Kells, an infinite architecture of crosses and spirals. How do you see Internet?*

DdeK: I don't see it at all. It is invisible, just like your nervous system. It is a hugely busy hypertext pressing behind the screen even as I am writing this (on line, of course). But it is not really amenable to sight as much as to touch. Navigating the web is a tactile affair. Things emerge on the screen in a way comparable to how they emerge at the front of your mind when you think or remember.

AB: *We have left the “global village”, we surf the Web of Webs but the technical abilities of the average citizen are not much greater than those of a Neanderthal. Beneath the veneer of culture, what sort of human being is this digital culture creating?*

DdeK: The average citizen is always in Neanderthal mode. That is why we get such Neanderthalian politicians. The digital culture is the cognitive phase of electricity. Just as we took the muscular phase (heat, light and energy) for granted, we are taking this new phase for granted. Most people only worry about how their body works when they have a backache, or about their car when they have to bring it to the garage. And even then, they don't want to know. But there is hope. The transformation is happening just as surely and unconsciously as it did at the time of the council of Trent when wise people were trying to put an old order into a religion that was being rapidly undermined by a totally new conception of man. Today, we are literally run over by the globalized and connective condition of humankind without the slightest moment of doubt.

AB: *You claim that information processing systems – especially hypertext – are extensions of our mind, rather like psychotechnologies. If we juxtapose your data with the latest advances in genetic engineering and cloning, what sort of future awaits us?*

DdeK: I call them psychotechnologies because they have one specific feature that they do not share directly with genetic engineering, that is their relationship to language. All

technologies that code, sort and transport language also modify it and modify the speaker, listener, and generally the user of language. Language entertains an intimate relationship with our mind and all technologies that affect language also affect the strategies we use to organize time, space and self. Hence psycho-technologies restructure our minds. But even if genetic engineering can eventually affect the way we (or the animals we change) think, it bypasses language to address the basic building materials of the physical being. These are different, although equally important manipulations of the status quo of our being. I can't predict the future that awaits us, my sole ambition is to predict the present.

AB: *Why does “virtual culture” seem to us to be an innocent concept whereas the idea of “virtual democracy” appears suspect?*

DdeK: Actually neither concept is innocent. Arthur Kroker wrote some rather perceptive and biting comments on the Virtual Class and the Data Trash world; on the other hand, with blogs, virtual democracy seems at least to represent a possible transmutation of democracy without losing its principal character, which is to give power to the people in reasonably equal measure. The present question is to what extent can the larger bulk of the population of the world participate usefully in blogs.

AB: *Has cyberwork truly made us more free or has it brought us closer to the smiling slaves of A Brave New World?*

DdeK: That depends on your point of view. If you hate your work, cyberwork is no better than the old kind, and probably worse because it is so relentless; however, if, as I do, you love what you do, cyberlife is wonderful and I can't get enough of it. I, personally, do not feel very worked up over the so-called information-overload, but it is true that I can't answer all the mail I get at the time I get it.

AB: *We live in a world full of electronic eyes that see and record everything. There is no longer any privacy on Internet. Will there soon be the need for a Universal Declaration of Cyberhuman Rights?*

DdeK: Yes, certainly. But the problem is much deeper than what barely surfaces in the few minds that care about this issue. The fundamental issue is whether electricity, like alphabetic literacy favours privacy or eliminates it. McLuhan had perceived this problem head-on. He believed that electricity would reveal everything hidden and wipe out private identity like a tidal wave. I am more nuanced. I believe that the politics and the psychology of private identity were entirely built on the fact that, thanks to the unambiguous representation of spoken language provided by the phonetic alphabet, each one of us can appropriate language on a personal basis for personal control and hence achieve personal ownership of mind and body. Spaniards, who invented the Holy Inquisition, should be well aware of how difficult and yet successful the battle for privacy of mind and for tolerance has been. Western humans became individuals at great cost of life and limb during the religious wars that followed the Reformation, itself a result of the spread of books by Gutenberg's invention. However, it is predictable that this model of humanity would suffer a setback under new electronic conditions that affect time, space and selfhood. But we have been there before and survived. While the printing press both accelerated the effects of the alphabet and recovered the classical heritage of how to be an individual in Greco-Roman terms (this is the meaning of Re-naissance, the second birth of western man), the medieval churches scurried around to create a slew of religious orders to protect the then obsolescing image of Christ as the unique model of mankind. Today to counterbalance the effects of electricity that threaten the private stance of the ABCED-minded man (James Joyce dixit) we are developing in universities and institutes, methods by which we can either accommodate the new connective identities of the

blogging world with the old private identities of the literate man, or simply provide niches where these older identities can still be protected.

AB: *In spite of its totalising ambitions, can the Net develop a new Humanism, a new Enlightenment?*

DdeK: Maybe, but Humanism and Enlightenment may not be the right models for the moment. The Net is really trying to provide as many people as it can reach with access to as much useful information as can be accessed. The Net is proposing a completely new modality of memory and information distribution. We are all in the aristocratic situation that Moliere described when he said: “A gentleman is someone who knows everything without having to bother to learn anything”. This is the natural condition of the new humanism.

AB: *The slogan of the French revolutionaries was “liberty, equality, fraternity”. Could yours be “interactivity, hypertextuality and connectivity”?*

DdeK: I wasn't trying to be political about these words. My politics is based on two or three core ideas:

1. It takes two wings to fly, so do not ask me to waste my time with the left or the right alone;
2. In a world where matter and history are losing their capacity of resistance to plans, simulations and programming, we are now capable of willing reality, not merely stay victims of history or nature;
3. The real political job of the ordinary man today is to develop as comprehensive, fair and inclusive a vision of the world as possible and act on it.

AB: *In 1962, when Man landed on the moon, we believed that in the near future we would be sleeping in the Jetsons' folding beds, and living in apartments shaped like flying saucers. Forty years on, our dream is to live in a log cabin on the shores of a lake, nuclear energy frightens us as much as do fossil fuels, and children in the Third World are being called Jonah, Rebecca and Moses, as in the Old Testament. Are these transitory tendencies or rebellion against the System?*

DdeK: McLuhan invented the tetrad to explain just this kind of phenomenon:

1. every new medium extends a human property (the car extends the foot);
2. obsolesces the previous medium by turning it into a sport or an form of art (the automobile turns horses and carriages into sports);
3. retrieves a much older medium that was obsolesced before (the automobile brings back the shining armour of the chevalier);
4. flips or reverses its properties into the opposite effect when pushed to its limits (the automobile, when there are too many of them, create traffic jams, that is total paralysis)

So it is conceivable that new media will tend to evoke or recall much older human situations. Lifestyle commercialism takes advantage of this without knowing anything about it. Some people start a trend without really thinking that they are, let say “Downshifter”, that is, people who would rather take a cut in salary to get out of the rat race and spend more time with their family, or in the country home with or without electricity, or “survivalists”, who believe in turning back into self-defense, not trusting civil society, or electronic hermits, people who live in total human isolation, but are hyperconnected via television, radio, the Net, SMS and what have you. In all these cases, all it takes is a handful of people with a discernable plan or attitude, for some clever advertising executive to spot it and turn it into a fad or a fashion. The next generation of media, based on quantum computers will bring back

the age of spirituality and mysticism well beyond anything the New Age philosophy could achieve because it will be supported by authentic scientific pretensions.

AB: *In your books, in between the irony and the revelations, one senses a powerful call for a change of paradigm. What would be key to a new identity?*

DdeK: The change of paradigm will depend on the third phase of electricity, the quantum phase. We have already absorbed the analog and the digital phases, and the quantum computer is already at a more advanced stage than the digital computer was when John Von Neumann began developing its architecture in the late forties. Today, we are at the post-Galilean moment when matter and science once solid are turning to liquid again. We may be getting back into a new kind of quantum cosmology where man is again at the centre of the universe, not as the centre of physical matter, but just of the information we have developed about it. As quantum physicist Erwin Schrodinger put it:

Our perceiving self is nowhere to be found within the world-picture, because it is itself the world-picture.

The key to the new identity is what I call “selving”, that is the self in progress, in becoming, as in quantum physics where “things are not, they merely tend to be”. The new identity is in perpetual formation and reformation at the moment of use and on line it is fluid and aggregative as when people meet and change their perceptions of each other during the meeting. I sometimes suspect that screens were invented only for the purpose of allowing several persons, minds, identities to meet and share thinking and speaking at a distance. The new connective thinking system is the screen.

AB: *And when relating to people in your everyday routine, do you find that you devote more time to face-to-face encounters or screen-to-screen ones?*

DdeK: To the latter, largely because I spend so much time on e-mail, but it is not always real-time, so, I have to admit that for real-time interactions, I spent a lot more time with real people...

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